

Eating for all you're worth

You know your turkey recipe is **delicious**,
but do you know your bird?

Skip **GMOs** this Holiday Season

BY MIKE MILLER

The holidays bring comfort in many ways: in fuzzy socks and cozy sweaters, in company around the fireplace, and especially in food. This year, consider skipping turkey with a side of antibiotics and herbicides for a healthier choice. You'll feel real comfort as you digest an organic, free-range, antibiotic-free turkey rather than its GMO-infused cousin.



Knowing the difference between well- and ill-raised turkeys is paramount for happy, healthy holiday guests. Free-range turkeys are allowed access to outdoor space, which is more humane and may result in more fantastic flavor. Certified organic birds are raised within tight regulations defined by the USDA and fed a strictly organic diet, also certified by the USDA. This translates to higher quality food for you and your guests. Opting for antibiotic-free turkeys can reduce human resistance to the drugs we rely on.

In lieu of toxic chemicals, turkeys require ample nutrients and vegetable proteins to mature in flavor and size. Choosing organic will help you steer clear of birds who have been fed fish meal, feather meal, meat, or other bakery by-products and animal by-products used in industrial turkey diets.

To learn more about responsible poultry husbandry, Natural Solutions spoke to David Pitman, a third-generation turkey farmer who raises his birds with ethics and nutrition as top priorities.

Pitman's birds, for example, munch on a USDA certified organic diet consisting of 65 percent corn, 30 percent soybean meal, and 5 percent vitamins and minerals. He views it as an environmental choice for consumers. "If you look at our organic bird, it's fed organic corn, meaning there was no pesticide or herbicide sprayed on those cornfields. So consumers are voting with their dollars on how those acres of corn are farmed," said Pitman.

But life wasn't always nutritiously delicious for Pitman's turkeys. Antibiotics and hormones were part of the main course for Pitman's birds, starting in the 1960s when little information substantiated any reason to nix the practice. However, studies have now proven the link between antibiotics and drug-resistant disease.

The Food and Drug Administration published in 2012 that "misuse and overuse of antimicrobial drugs

creates selective evolutionary pressure that enables antimicrobial resistant bacteria to increase in numbers more rapidly than antimicrobial susceptible bacteria and thus increases the opportunity for individuals to become infected by resistant bacteria." Essentially, antibiotic use kills the majority of bacteria in food-producing animals, but a few resist, proliferate, and become superbugs—usually for the sake of improving weight gain and feed efficiency.

In the 1990s, Pitman helped guide the family farm back to its organic roots in response to customers' requests. "In '95 we circled back and raised our first 5,000 turkeys without antibiotics again. Now we're full-circle back where we started," he said.

However antibiotic-free farms are more difficult and costly to operate. Without antibiotics fighting off disease that modern turkeys are susceptible to, factors like ventilation, air quality, and temperature control become paramount for keeping healthy birds. Cramped quarters also promote transmission of bacteria, so grazing space is a must. "We found you really have to reduce the stress of the bird," said Pitman. "When you can't use antibiotics, you've got to improve your management." Additionally, improved quality of life and a relaxing environment makes for tender meat on the table, according to Pitman.

This holiday season, Pitman encourages us to invest in the environment, our health, and smaller farms. With a worthy bird and the following great recipes—you'll be able to fix an incredibly tasty main course that melds holiday traditions with healthy choices.



FLYING BACK TO OUR HERITAGE

The heritage movement strives to preserve biodiversity in today's crops and food-producing animals and has now spread its wings to preserve heritage breeds of turkeys, such as the Bourbon Red, Standard Bronze, and Narragansett. Farmers achieve this by raising varieties similar to those you might have once seen in the wild, rather than the specimens bred to be top-heavy which dominate today's grocery store shelves.

As close to wild turkeys as they come, heritage breeds sport colorful plumage and natural proportions. They're also more arduous to farm, according to Pitman, as they take twice as long to grow (8 months) and produce half the meat of the broad-breasted white.

But the differences don't stop there: heritage turkeys possess more (dark) thigh meat at the cost of (white) breast meat, are more tender, and offer far richer flavors than their white-feathered counterparts. This is in part because of diet and exercise—heritage turkeys retain their natural tendencies to forage, run, jump, and fly. "It's literally a wild turkey," said Pitman.

By promoting genetically diversified breeds, farmers help to ensure the survivability and genetic strength of the species. Ironically, killing—and eating—they are the best way to save them. Supporting the farmers who raise these majestic poultry breeds encourages the practice and allows the birds to prosper.



TASTY TURKEY TIPS

For best—and most scrumptious—results, follow Pitman's baking tips when preparing your own turkey this holiday season.

- » Remove the **wire** that holds the drumsticks together
- » Place a **thermometer** in the thickest part of the thigh
- » **Watch** the turkey closely the last hour
- » After 145 degrees, the thermometer temperature will rise **quickly**
- » Heritage turkeys are **done** when the thigh meat reaches 150 to 155 degrees
- » Free range and organic turkeys are **done** when the thigh meat reaches 165 to 170 degrees
- » Let **rest** for 20 to 30 minutes before carving

CERTIFIABLY SCRUMPTIOUS

Pitman cautions consumers to trust only what is written on turkey packaging itself. Anything you see on store signage or separate marketing materials is not evaluated by the USDA, he said. Go by what's on the bag and take anything else with a grain of salt. And if a turkey boasts any of the following seals, it bears our seal of approval:

USDA ORGANIC: If this label turns up on product packaging, that product is certified organic and contains at least 95 percent organic content. If specific ingredients are listed as organic, only those ingredients have been certified organic. Note: Organic certification is only available to turkeys fed exclusively on a USDA certified organic diet.

NON-GMO PROJECT VERIFIED: The Non-GMO Project is the United States' only independent verification program for non-GMO products. If a product bears its logo, you can rest assured its contents and other claims on its packaging meet or exceed the standards set by the Non-GMO Project.

MANDATORY FEDERAL INSPECTION: Raw poultry is required by law to be inspected for wholesomeness. The process is carried out by the Food Safety and Inspection Service, a division of the USDA, and various other agencies of the USDA to protect the integrity and safety of meat and poultry products. Product packaging—or the meat itself—is stamped with the official seal. The stipulations include but are not limited to tests for disease, and microbiological and chemical contamination. [ns](#)